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Assessment in competition as a tool for developing high school marching bands

Zaharul Lailiddin Saidon^a, Shahanum Mohamad Shah^b,

^a*Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim, Perak, 35900, Malaysia*

^b*Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, 40200, Malaysia*

Abstract

This article outlines an investigation of assessment in competition as a tool to assist the development of marching bands. Based on the process model of assessing musical performance (McPherson & Thompson, 1998), this study examined factors that impact judges' assessment particularly in a competition setting and how the judging system can be used to improve the quality of Malaysian school bands. A qualitative analysis of transcripts of interviews with six marching band judges identified key issues relating to the ways experienced examiners use criteria in music performance assessment.

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1. Introduction

Music performance assessment is a common practice and an integral part of a music education program. Generally defined, music performance assessment is a process by which the various qualities of a performance of an individual or a group of performers are analyzed by an adjudicator or a group of adjudicators with the aim of providing judgment in the form of scores, grades, ranking and/or qualitative description (McPherson & Thompson, 1998). The essential aim of a music performance assessment is to improve the learning and teaching process related to the performance adjudicated. Scores and comments given by adjudicators could help identify strengths and weaknesses in a performance as well as suggesting areas and ways for improvement. It is the part of the instructional process that can inform both teacher and learner. In the context of the marching band as a performance group, a common assessment practice is through participation in competitions. Assessment, even in competition, is a process that measures students' growth (MENC, 2001). Research has indicated that instrumental skills and musical achievement can be positively influenced in a competitive setting (Rickels, 2009; Temple, 1973). For example, in marching band competitions, adjudicators give verbal and/or written comments, scores and ranking based on their analysis of participating bands performances. According to Gonzalez (2005), the assessment given at band competitions can place students' efforts into a more concrete context in conjunction with those of their peers which in turn allows the students to draw more substantial conclusions regarding their performances.

* Zaharul Lailiddin Saidon. Tel: +605-4506692
Email address: zaharul@upsi.edu.my

Austin (1990) believe that competition in music help generate student interest, stimulate higher achievement levels, measure achievement in comparison to peers, and to prepare students for the real world. Beach (cited in Austin, 1990) is also of the opinion that the goal of competition was “not to win a prize but to pace one another on the road to excellence” and as a tool of educational progress.

However, despite being a common practice, music educators and adjudicators often confront difficulties and challenges related to assessment of music performances (McPherson & Thompson, 1998; Stanley, Brooker, & Gillbert, 2002, Bergee, 2007). Review of related literature on music performance assessment show that it is a complex system comprising of numerous factors and interrelated influences which need to be well understood by all parties involved in the assessment process. In addition, the subjective nature of quality in musical performance makes accurate assessment difficult.

Due to the nature of the field, music requires diverse assessment techniques in various settings. While there has been much research conducted on bands, few however, have focused on the educational and developmental aspects of competition in relation to the marching band, and specifically on factors which affect judges' assessment in the context of the marching band. McPherson and Thompson (1998) provide a schematic representation of the primary issues surrounding performance assessment. The model illustrates a complex set of interacting factors that affect performance and assessment, including context, musical and nonmusical factors, evaluation instruments and/or criteria, performer and evaluator characteristics, and feedback to the performer. The latter influence underscores the dual role of assessment as both a description of performance and a guide for improvement. As the model was developed more for the purpose of solo performances, this study examined the factors which impact marching band competition judges' assessment particularly in formal performance setting as in competitions based on the model.

2. Method

The qualitative method was used in this study in which the instrument selected for data collection was the interview format. This approach was selected in part due to the small number of Malaysian band judges involved in adjudicating national band competitions. Respondents for the interview were six marching band judges who are involved with judging Malaysian Band Competitions.

Questions distilled from McPherson and Thompson's (1998) study of factors that affect assessment was used to guide interviews that focused on issues such as the purpose of assessment, the examiner's assessment procedures (in particular their use of criteria), current assessment practices of the judges, and factors which influenced their judging in the marching band context. In particular, the factors presented to the judges included context, musical factors, non musical factors, evaluation items and/or criteria, performer, evaluator characteristics, and feedback to the performer.

An analysis of interview transcripts was undertaken to identify emerging issues and trends in the data. Key themes in the researchers' analysis, which provide a framework for the ensuing presentation of study findings, were verified through on-going consultation between interviewees and researchers.

3. Results

Presentation of the results of the analysis commences with a summary of assessment procedures marching band judges use when assessing competitions. The summary provides a context for discussion of the factors that affect assessment. The following discussion centers on responses drawn from the interviews.

In terms of assessment procedures, judges identified two processes to assessment that frequently occur during judging. Most respondents indicated that, initially, they adopt a holistic approach. In the early stage of assessment, four of the respondents will place bands on a perceived level based on their first impression and their subjective reactions of the performance. While three judges identified three levels, i.e., weak, fair, and good, one judge included an extra level which is excellent.

The second process involves identification of performance characteristics based on specific criteria that support the global assessment in order to justify their initial assessment. The criteria are considered a checklist to see whether they are listening to all aspects of the performance. Most respondents indicated that they completed this

criteria assessment close to the end of the performance because the performance can change during the course. These assessment processes are employed to varying extents by the majority of respondents but not necessarily in the sequence outlined above. One respondent combined holistic and specific approaches maintaining that as she was trying to get a global view of the performance, she would not constantly be going through a list of criteria with the performance. Another respondent tended to refer to the criteria throughout the performance although it was not at the forefront of his thoughts.

In terms of the factors that can affect assessment in a marching band context, Table 1 presents a summary of factors identified by the respondents.

Table 1. Summary of responses for factors that affect judges' assessment

Category	Factors
Context	Performance environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Indoor/Outdoor Time of day Weather conditions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rain, soggy field conditions Position of judges in relation to the performance
Musical Factors	Choice of repertoire performed Performance Skills Size of the band
Non musical factors	Order of appearance Expectations or perceived quality of a band Audience interference Repeated performance Influence of authority
Evaluation items and /or criteria	Evaluative criteria and evaluative instruments to improve the validity and reliability of assessment.
Performer	Technical and musical skills
Evaluator characteristics	Training Familiarity with repertoire Personality, mood and attitude

4. Discussion

The intention of the above study was to highlight factors which may influence the assessment process in the context of a marching band competition as assessment can be a tool for the development of marching bands. According to McPherson and Thompson (1998), the evaluation process is the implicit and explicit decisions that lead to an assessment. Consistent scoring is a major concern to judges. Inconsistent exposure places both judges and bands at a disadvantage as the judges are measuring the band's growth.

In this study, variables such as the context of the performance, musical and non-musical factors, performer's ability, evaluation criteria and evaluator characteristics appeared to influence ratings awarded. In terms of context, the performance environment, be in an indoor or outdoor venue, will have an effect on the acoustics which will in

turn affect the sounds that the judges hear. Weather conditions such as rain can affect field conditions as will the position of judges in the stadium which may affect both the sound and the visual aspect of the performance.

In discussing their music performance assessment strategies examiners described holistic and criteria-specific approaches. Some examiners felt using criteria helped them focus on important assessment issues and that criteria were useful for articulating desirable performance characteristics in feedback to students. As the judging system for the Malaysian band competitions allocates one judge for each caption, having a set of criteria to refer to will assist judges on the relevant criteria to focus on. Having a set of criteria helps give focus on relevant aspects of the performance, gives clear guidelines on how to judge the performance, and informs the bands the essence of the qualities they must achieve. Criteria can also help provide specific feedback to students and convey clear information to students.

The quality of the musical performance is the most critical determinant of the assessment. The performers' ability to deliver their performance in terms of technical and musical skills as well as the consistency of performance quality will greatly affect assessment. In addition, it is also important for the repertoire and design of the program to be appropriate for the level of the band.

All the judges agreed that training is important as it facilitates the assessment process by highlighting evaluative criteria that are determined before the assessment. In the context of the Malaysian marching band competition, it is also very necessary as the performance comprised both music and visual effects and only one judge assesses each caption. While judges maintain that their personality, mood and attitude during the competition do not affect their assessment, two judges cautioned that assessment could be affected by these factors although it should not be the case.

5. Conclusion

If assessment in competition is to act as a tool to develop marching bands, being aware of the factors which influence assessment is not only important for judges but also for the competition organizers. The identified factors need to be taken into consideration to control for biasness and for reliability of the assessment process. The study's findings also have implications for adjudicator training. Training will need to include caveats against consideration of the external factors indicated to be an influence and deal directly with the problem. For example, training could emphasize the understanding of the different captions and the evaluation criteria for each caption, and evaluations of audiotapes of performances with ratings differences noted and discussed. Because students, teachers, and others place much importance on participating in competitions, adjudicator reliability requires further attention particularly in light that competition is used as a tool to develop marching bands.

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